

Early Learning Council/K-12 Advisory Committee Joint Workgroup Interim Report to Early Learning Council

Charge to Workgroup

The Joint Workgroup was created by the Early Learning Council and the K-12 Advisory Committee to look at areas of common interest, develop shared goals, and make recommendations for achieving shared goals.

Context for Work

In its November 2005 Interim Report, the Washington Learns Steering Committee posed eight core questions to guide the development of a world-class, learner-focused education system. The first question is: "Are all children entering kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life?"

This core question is consistent with the Early Learning Council's vision for early learning: "To create a sustainable, integrated and accessible early learning system that provides parents, families, caregivers and communities in Washington State with the information, support and services to ensure that every child is prepared from birth for success in school and life."

The Council reinforced this vision with a series of goals, the first two of which are:

- Parents are supported as their children's first teachers and primary decision makers and have an array of early learning choices including family, friend and neighbor care;
- All children, including children with special needs, are ready for school and schools are ready for children.

Similarly, the goals of the Education Structures Subgroup of the K-12 Advisory Committee include the following:

- All students enter kindergarten with the interpersonal, language, and early literacy skills needed to succeed;

In addition, parent/family involvement will be part of the Subgroup's final goals – either as a stand-alone goal or integrated into each goal.

Common Goal, Key Assumptions and Guiding Question

Given the core question posed by the Washington Learns Steering Committee and the visions of the Early Learning Council and the Education Structures Subgroup, the Joint Workgroup quickly established the overall common goal of school readiness – children ready for school and schools ready for children.

Early in its deliberations, the Joint Workgroup also established two key assumptions:

1. It is impossible to achieve school readiness without parents' and families' active and meaningful involvement as their children's first and most important teachers. Parent and family engagement is the foundation upon which school success is built.
2. Seamless connections between a child's pre-school-age and out-of-school time environments and school are critical. It should be easy for children and families to move from one setting to another, regardless of where a child is coming from.

With these assumptions in mind, the Joint Workgroup then used the following question to guide their conversation:

"When parents, child care and early learning providers, and schools are working together to support children's development and success in school, what will we see?"

The following eight distinguishing features were identified:

1. There is a true partnership of parents, child care and early learning providers, and schools, characterized by mutual respect and trust.

Parents, child care and early learning providers, and K-12 educators have equal footing and come to the table as equals. In addition, they learn from each other – i.e., parents are encouraged to share their expertise on their children and their development, child care and early learning providers broaden K-3 teachers' understanding of child development, and K-3 teachers broaden parents' and child care and early learning providers' understanding of the skills and knowledge children need to be successful in school.

2. Parents and families are empowered to help their children succeed in school.

This requires:

- Demonstrating the belief that parents are their children's first and most important teacher by actively engaging them in their children's early learning and on-going education.
- Reaching out to families on their terms, in ways that recognize cultural differences and the fact that many parents have had negative experiences in school.
- Ensuring that parents and families have access to culturally appropriate tools and resources to help them prepare their children for school.

3. Schools and child care and early learning providers actively help entering kindergartners and their families make smooth transitions to school and between school and out-of-school-time care.

The goal is to facilitate communication between parents, other caregivers, and a child's teacher. The specific vehicle used to do this will vary – e.g., it could be a portfolio demonstrating the child's skills and knowledge or it could be a conversation between a child's parents, other care provider and teacher. What's important is the opportunity to come together and share information on incoming kindergartners – who they are and how they learn – and using that information to create appropriate learning environments for all children.

Special note should be made of the role child care providers may play in planning for children eligible for special education services. Child care providers are second only to a child's parent in their knowledge of that child's development and their responsibility for creating that child's out-of-school-time learning environment. Subject to parent approval, child care providers serving IDEA-eligible children should be invited to participate in IEP conferences and written into the plans as appropriate.

4. New attitudes among child care and early learning providers and public school educators are reflected in their beliefs and actions.

All public school educators and child care and early learning providers:

- Recognize that a child's early years comprise a continuum of growth and development (rather than view birth to age 5 and kindergarten to grade 3 as separate, unconnected phases of child's life).
- Define school readiness as children ready for schools and schools ready for children.
- Reach out to one another as respected professionals with valued expertise.
- Recognize and take full advantage of tribal early learning resources.
- Support efforts to increase the quality of child care and early learning programs and K-3 education.
- View schools as community centers, providing and/or offering space for family and other caregiver support services.

5. Effective school-child and early learning provider partnerships result in the sharing of resources.

For example, schools could:

- Invite children and families served by child care and early learning providers to attend age-appropriate school events;
- Offer surplus materials to child care and early learning providers;
- Create materials loan programs and joint purchasing opportunities;

- Offer training opportunities for child care and early learning providers, including joint training with kindergarten teachers;
- Provide transportation to and from school from and to child care.

Child care and early learning providers could:

- Invite other providers and kindergarten teachers to participate in training programs they conduct.

6. Child care and early learning provider and school partnerships are part of wider community collaborations that support child development and success in school.

Potential community partners include: child care resource and referral programs, education service districts, libraries, parks districts, health departments, etc.

7. The result of the community collaborations are locally appropriate solutions, based on best practices and promoting aligned efforts focused on what works for children and families.
8. Child outcome and program assessment data are used to continuously improve the quality of early learning and K-3 approaches and practices.

Next Steps

The Joint Workgroup is now looking at ways to promote parents, child care and early learning providers, and schools working together to support children's development and success in school. As part of this conversation, the Workgroup is identifying existing barriers to parents, providers, and schools working together and possible changes in state rules and regulations and/or school district practices to remove these barriers. In addition, the Workgroup is discussing major policy recommendations that support the Early Learning Council's and K-12 Advisory Committee's common goal of children ready for school and schools ready for children.